

Honest Theft

[Yesterday](#) I mentioned the case of my friends who save money by living at MIT. They sleep on couches in the common rooms, break into the showers in the gym, and steal food and drink from the cafeterias. They use the money they save on necessities to promote the public good. I suggested that they're actually behaving more morally than the average citizen. This seems shocking, so let's look at the objections in depth.

There's the obvious argument that by taking these things without paying, they're actually passing on their costs to the rest of the MIT community. But for most of these things, there are no costs: no MIT students use the couches or the showers at night. And while it's true that taking MIT food and drink probably does increase the university's costs slightly, this concern doesn't seem too consistently applied. Do you think it's wrong to take one of the free refreshments at an MIT event? The consequences seem about the same.

Even if they were costing MIT money, it seems this could be justified. MIT receives enormous sums from the wealthy and powerful, more than they know how to spend. Much of it gets spent on unneeded luxuries for their already-elite students. Redistributing it to the town's poorer residents seems potentially justified.

Others claim that this lifestyle results in increased security costs. I don't see how that's true unless the students get caught. Even if they did, MIT has a notoriously relaxed security policy, so they likely wouldn't get in too much trouble and MIT probably wouldn't do anything to up their security.

A more serious complaint is that this "erodes the social contract." Peter Singer (no contract theorist he!) puts this more clearly in his book *Democracy and Disobedience*: In any society people are going to have disputes. Everyone's better off if these disputes are resolved without resorting to force. Thus in most societies there are governments to help resolve disputes peacefully. Resorting to force when you don't like their resolution could tip things back to the bad state of people resolving things through force in general.

I don't think this is a particularly plausible concern. My friends (understandably) keep quiet about their lifestyle. If anyone, I am the one undermining the social contract by publicizing it. But let's keep me out of this analysis for a second. It's hard to see how sleeping on MIT couches will lead to violent revolution.¹

It's possible there are other objections to this style of life. Or perhaps some objectors are right — and not only shouldn't we steal from MIT, but we shouldn't take advantage of their largesse either. But thinking about these questions — as opposed to blindly following rules — is what it means to be a moral person and instead of eroding the social contract it seems much more likely to strengthen our moral sense.

Singer identifies one other concern, particular to democracies. (He thinks the previous concern is especially relevant in democracies, since there's not much improvement revolution can lead to, but in the end he decides this isn't too relevant since modern "democracies" aren't actually democratic.) He suggests that it's wrong to participate in politics and vote like everybody else, but then refuse to follow the rules when the decision ends up being something you don't like.

I think this is a fairly silly objection and basically impossible to justify on utilitarian grounds. (The book is Singer's doctoral thesis and is weirdly agnostic on utilitarianism. It's also not particularly well-written, so my apologies if I'm missing part of Singer's argument.)

Imagine it's a presidential election year and the major issue is that candidate A has promised to make kids in public schools wear uniforms while candidate B opposes it. (Imagine also that the president has the power to accomplish this rule change by simple executive order.) Whatever happens, you refuse to send your child to school wearing a uniform — you plan to keep dressing them as you do now. You have two choices: vote for candidate B or not cast a vote for president.

Singer suggests that if you vote for B and A wins, you ought to make your child wear the uniform. It's hard to see how this helps anyone. Nobody knows whether you voted for president or not (it's a secret ballot), no good (as far as I can see) comes from not voting. Indeed, if you vote for B, you make it more likely that everyone avoids this unjust law *and* you make it more likely you won't have to resort to civil disobedience and erode the social fabric.

It's hard to see how any intuitive notion of obligation can trump this. ■

You should follow me on twitter [here](#).

September 15, 2009